

## MAYA K'ICHE' FAMILIES AND INTERGENERATIONAL MIGRATION WITHIN AND ACROSS BORDERS: AN EXPLORATORY MIXED-METHODS STUDY<sup>1</sup>

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*This research explores the lived experiences of transnational migrant sending families in one Mayan village in the Southern Quiché region of Guatemala. It is part of a transnational partnership between university-based activist scholars in the northeastern U.S. and K'iche' Maya and ladinx in Zacualpa and its villages. Reversing a trend in the much migration research that focuses on economic advantages of remittances for sending families, this study, part of a broader participatory and action research project, deployed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design to unpack multiple diverse and conflicting effects of transnational migration on sending families. Analyses from 10 in-depth interviews with heads of households with at least one unauthorized migrant and a community-based survey with 137 village families found that despite families' with transnational migrants being able to build larger homes and increase their material possessions, some reported overwhelming levels of migratory debt (up to \$31,000 USD) that sometimes led to loss of homes or lands. Interviewees focused on family-level decisions favoring migration despite the harsh realities of the journey and life in the U.S. Iteratively analyzed results document one local community's experiences of transbordering family "from the bottom up", and suggest that these Maya perform migration as civil disobedience and decolonization.*

### 1. Introduction

The United States has long been a major receiving country of immigrants from around the world. As of 2017 there were an estimated 44.5 million immigrants in the United States, comprising 13.7% of the U.S. population (Zong, Batalova, & Burrows, 2019). Although undocumented migrants are more difficult to count, an estimated 11.3 million, that is, 25% of the total number of immigrants, resided in the U.S. in 2016 (Zong et al., 2019). In 2017, 44% of all

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is dedicated to the memory and legacy of Kelsey Rennebohm who collaborated in the data analysis reported herein while pursuing graduate studies at Boston College. She was killed in a cycling accident on June 1, 2012, weeks before she was to travel to Guatemala to join the participatory action research team whose work is described herein.

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immigrants in the U.S. were of Latino origin (Zong et al., 2019). Despite increasing research with Latinx residing in the U.S., much less is known about how sending families and communities, that is, those who remain in countries of origin or are forcibly sent back, respond to and make meanings of these experiences. This exploratory study with one Maya K'iche' village is part of a larger multi-year participatory and action research process through which local Mayan protagonists and local as well as transnational advocates, activist scholars, educators, and service providers understood and responded to longstanding intergenerational internal and transnational forced migration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through iterative analyses of 10 in-depth interviews and a community-based census we document one community's meaning making processes "from the ground up", situating them within a transnational discussion about political-economic migration.

As Kanstroom (2007) has noted, the U.S. has always welcomed migrants with one hand and deported them with the other, processes that are deeply racialized. Since 9/11, U.S. policies and practice have become increasingly hostile toward migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, including asylum-seekers and "political-economic migrants" (Achieme, 2017; 2019). Changes to border and interior enforcement threaten both migrants who journey north as well as those living in the U.S. without proper documentation. For example, the Trump administration has turned to increasingly brutal practices of separating children and parents at the border, detaining youth in inadequate and repressive centers longer than the six weeks permitted by court decisions, and instituting so-called "Migrant Protection Protocols", forcing migrants seeking entry at the U.S. southern border to return to or remain in Mexico or a "Safe Third Country" (e.g., Guatemala) rather than the U.S., the country in which they seek asylum.

These repressive practices make headlines in Central America and the U.S. while neither reducing the numbers heading north nor clarifying why people living in sending communities continue to risk the journey. The policies and practices of 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberal global capitalism are but the most recent repressive political-economic incursions in post-genocidal Guatemala where extreme poverty, gang violence, femicide, extractive industries, and structural racism persist, continuing to marginalize rural Mayan families and their communities' well-being. Trump's inflammatory rhetoric and multiple efforts to "build a wall" at the U.S.'s southern border with Mexico as well as the growing militarization there and at Mexico's border with Guatemala are designed to dissuade migration but are met by migrants' increasing resistance or what José Luis Rocha (2017) characterizes as "civil disobedience" evidenced in, among other creative strategies, the caravans that they have organized that both reduce costs and enhance protection when traveling north.

The work presented here reports on some of the characteristics and experiences of one Mayan community that has been significantly impacted by migration. This community is one among others who participated in the Migration and Human Rights Project (MHRP) of the Center for Human Rights & International Justice at Boston College (BC) and the Franciscan sisters in Zacualpa (see Lykes, McDonald, & Boc, 2012, for a full description of the project). The MHRP was developed to provide psychosocial accompaniment (Watkins, 2019) to migrant families and communities through designing and facilitating participatory and action research processes (Lykes & Crosby, 2015) that documented their experiences and the multiple ways in which these sending families were affected by transnational migration. The project was initiated in 2008 in response to the March 6, 2007 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid on the Bianco factory in New Bedford, MA. Three hundred sixty-one mostly Guatemalan and predominantly young Mayan workers, including 110 who were the sole caretakers of U.S. born children, were

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detained in the raid. CHRIJ students and staff partnered with two U.S. immigrant organizations to collaborate in providing resources and advocacy for those detained and their families. BC staff and students traveled to Guatemala the following summer where we met and interviewed youth and adults some of whose family members had been arrested in New Bedford and many others with one or both parents in the U.S. (Lykes & Sibley, 2013). These initial experiences emerged from the CHRIJ's underlying commitment to participatory and action research (PAR) (Maguire, 1987) and accompaniment (Watkins, 2019), which stress the importance of forging relationships and walking alongside local partners towards dialogically co-constructing knowledge that reflects and critically interrogates local experiences (Lykes & Crosby, 2015). Drawing on a variety of creative resources and local Indigenous cultural beliefs and practices, PAR generates teaching-learning processes through which local co-researchers identify concerns, problematize their root causes, discern appropriate actions to redress injustices, and build social movements to ensure transformative change. The MHRP initiated a decade-long transnational collaboration including multiple U.S. and Guatemala-based surveys with migrants to identify the impact of the threat of deportation on their families, participatory teaching-learning workshops with undocumented migrants, and creative workshops with children of undocumented parents to investigate how they understand detention, deportation, and their own identities as members of transnational families (Lykes, Sibley, Brabeck, Hunter, & Johansen, 2015).

The current study focuses on the MHRP's transnational work in Guatemala beginning with visits and community meetings in Zacualpa and surrounding villages in 2008. This exploratory study aimed to better understand the characteristics of migrants, the experience of families with members who migrate, and the effects of migration on those "left behind" in Zacualpa. It includes a first phase of qualitative interviews from 2010 and a second quantitative phase from 2011, findings from which are reported in this article. The two phases of data collection, analysis, and reporting mirror the dialogic relationships developed *in situ*.

## **2. Brief background on Zacualpa, its villages, and its migrants**

Basic Guatemalan national survey data from 2000 is available, although very few specifics about municipalities such as Zacualpa, the epicenter of the Guatemala-based work discussed here, have been assessed. The most recent country-wide census estimated the population of the town and its villages in 2002 at 23,000, while locally derived estimates in 2011, when the quantitative data reported here was collected, were closer to 40,000 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2010). A locally produced monograph in 2000 noted the town and its villages had a population that was 95% Maya K'iche' and described a literacy rate of only 32%.

Because of the difficulty in counting undocumented or political-economic migrants, it is unclear how many Guatemalans are living in the United States without authorization. U.S. census data counted 928,000 people in the U.S. who were born in Guatemala, representing 27.4% of all Central American immigrants in the U.S. (Lesser & Batalova, 2017) whereas the Inter-American Dialogue's (2019) Fact Sheet: Family Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean in 2018 notes that 975,504 Guatemalans were living in the U.S. in 2017. Community-level data on migration from Guatemala is virtually non-existent, making it challenging to determine the impact of migration on villages and municipalities.

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## 2.1. Rural Mayan Migrations Within and Beyond Local Community Borders

*Colonization and Ongoing Racialized Violence.* Mayan migration beyond the borders of their rural communities is longstanding and multigenerational. Such movements both predated and unfolded within the context of the Spanish colonization of Mesoamerica (see Achiune, 2017; 2019 for a discussion of colonization and the ensuing interdependent relations between colonizers and those whose lands they occupied). Twentieth and twenty-first century regional and transnational socio-economic and political forces contribute to diverse migratory experiences within and beyond local borders. These include families' seasonal migration to *fincas* [plantations] on the Southern coast, processes that remove children from schooling as they work alongside their parents; migration to the capital in search of paid work as survival increasingly requires access to cash; and mass migration in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century generated by war and genocidal violence (Grandin, Levenson, & Oglesby, 2011). In the wake of the U.S.'s involvement in the 1954 overthrow of Guatemala's democratically elected government, one military dictator after another launched or sustained state-sponsored violence, often supported by the U.S. (Grandin, et al., 2011). Although the rural population (the majority of whom are Maya) was already living in extreme poverty with low levels of formal education, the 36-year armed conflict exacerbated these factors and included the disappearance of at least 40,000 people, the deaths of over 200,000, and massacres in more than 636 rural villages (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico [CEH], 1999). In its final report, the CEH enumerated multiple military attacks in Zacaulpa and its surrounding communities, including the torture and murder of civilians and massacres in multiple villages (CEH, 1999). The Zacaulpa region was selected as one of the paradigmatic cases upon which the CEH based its conclusion that acts of genocide had been committed against the Maya (CEH, 1999).

Current post war policies and practices sustain a new generation of oligarchies and military leadership who are responsible for new forms of violence and oppression. Government corruption and ongoing impunity stymie peoples' struggles for truth and redress in the aftermath of war, denying justice to thousands of survivors who remain mired in extreme poverty. Gang violence has spiraled out of control with murder rates in Guatemala, as well as in neighboring El Salvador and Honduras, among the highest in the world. Human trafficking and femicide mimic the torture and disappearances during the armed conflict. It is in this scenario that many Maya migrate from these geopolitical peripheries to global centers, fleeing severe socio-economic and political conditions and seeking better opportunities (Achiune, 2017; 2019).

*Remittances, Migrants, and Rural Families.* Today, financial issues are often noted as among the primary motivators for households who send family members north. Remittances are sums of money sent to the home country by the migrant to help the family left behind make ends meet, improve their living situation (including providing food, healthcare, and education for children), buy land, or to help pay off debts including those incurred by migration.

Remittances from the U.S. to Guatemala were estimated at \$4.3 billion in 2010 (Ratha, Mohapatra, & Silwal, 2011) when the data reported here were collected. These cash flows are a significant source of income in Guatemala, constituting 12% of the GDP in 2018 (Inter-American Dialogue, 2019); it was estimated that in 2010, over 4.5 million Guatemalans (about 32% of the population) received remittances from family members living abroad. Taylor, Moran-Taylor, and Ruiz (2006) reported ethnographic data demonstrating that remittances to Guatemala allowed families to accumulate land and advance individual families' economic well-being, but that few funds were invested in community or country-wide development.

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*Psychosocial Effects of Forced Migration.* Migration flows to and from Central and South America have created a large number of transnational and mixed-status families, i.e., household units where members of the family have separate living arrangements in different countries and/or members with diverse citizenship statuses due to migration, but retain close communication links with those in the country of origin (Schmalzbauer, 2005). Although there is no definite count of U.S.-based transnational families, the impressive number of immigrants calls attention to the importance of studying the experiences of these families. Recent research has shown that these families face a number of challenges, including the negative psychosocial impact of the threat of deportation (Brabeck & Xu, 2010), feelings of isolation and sadness due to the separation of families (Brabeck, Lykes, & Hershberg, 2011), and the financial stress of remittances, that is, needing to send money home while supporting themselves and other family members in the U.S. (Schmalzbauer, 2005).

Despite fewer studies focused on the socioemotional impact of migration on children left behind, some have found that when parents migrate, children are often left in the care of relatives or friends because it is either too expensive or too dangerous for children to make the journey (Hershberg & Lykes, 2015). Artico (2003) found that some children of migrants feel a sense of guilt and the need to re-pay their parents for these sacrifices while Schmalzbauer (2008) notes that some youth “left behind” come to rely on remittances rather than on their own initiatives. In many cases, sending a family member to the United States is a collective process, where extended family members work together to pool resources to send the migrating member north. This decision envisions benefits for the entire family and assumes the ability to repay the loan which enabled their travel north and the immediate receipt of remittances.

## **2.2. *Accompanying these families***

Given the lack of reliable data and the dearth of detailed information on the impact of migration on local communities, this exploratory study examines migrant sending family’s experiences of the impact of migration, narrating their decisions for a family member to migrate and some of the perceived effects of having at least one family member in the U.S. The current study is embedded within the larger MHRP project that began in 2008 with visits and community meetings in villages surrounding Zacualpa. These meetings were facilitated by local partners, including members of the social ministry in the local parish and the Franciscan sisters with whom we initiated the transnational project. Mayan youth over 18 years old and young adults were recruited through the parish to join our team and co-researchers were trained in ethics and PAR research strategies by the first author and a local colleague, drawing on materials designed collaboratively with the university-based IRB. The majority of local co-researchers were Maya and spoke K’iche’ as well as Spanish. International and ladinx co-researchers spoke only Spanish and English.

The first phase of this mixed-methods research included in-depth interviews with ten local Mayan families about their meaning making vis-à-vis sending migrants north, including remittances, levels of debt, and the socioemotional realities of transborder migration. The themes identified, along with a range of emergent questions from local co-researchers who sought additional information to advocate locally for enhanced community well-being, were used to inform and initiate a collaborative community survey or census. The latter, described as Phase 2 in this report, included a survey which was completed by 95% of the heads of households in one

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village. The data from these two phases constitute this exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, & Smith, 2011) towards better understanding the lived experiences and multiple consequences of migration on families in one Maya K'iche' village.

### **3. Methods**

#### ***3.1. Qualitative interviews (phase 1)***

The in-depth interviews with ten family members from Tablón during the summer of 2010 offered an opportunity to better understand their family configurations as well as their experiences with migration. Families were chosen by the local co-researchers to fit the criteria of having at least one family member who had migrated to and was currently living in the U.S.

An interview guide was developed drawing on previous interviews conducted in surrounding villages during 2008. The Boston College IRB approved those interviews, as well as both phases of the research reported here. Participants gave their informed consent orally, including their permission to audio tape record the interview. The interviews were conducted in Spanish by two or more members of the research team; four interviewees required interpretation provided by a local Mayan bilingual co-researcher. The presence of local interviewers as well as the U.S. interviewers' previous experiences in the village and the surrounding town contributed to developing "just enough trust" (Maguire, 1987) to facilitate this process. That said, access to participants was through the local Catholic parish therefore interviewees do not represent the breath of those living in the community.

Parents and grandparents of sending families, including two who were forcibly deported from the U.S., were asked to share stories about themselves and their family members, with specific attention to questions regarding (1) previous and current migrations of family members; (2) return of family members, voluntarily or through deportation; (3) experiences of the family while the family member was away including transnational communication with the migrant; and, (4) any advantages or hardships faced as a consequence of a family member's migration. Interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes in duration. Each interview was transcribed by a Spanish-English bilingual researcher from the U.S.

#### ***3.2. Quantitative surveys (phase 2)***

The local co-researchers sought to extend these in-depth stories about migration beyond this small group of families to determine to what extent others in the wider community might share their experiences of the costs and benefits of migration and on how family was being sustained in this context. Based on these interests, U.S.-based and local co-researchers decided to survey every household of the municipality of Zacualpa and those neighboring villages who were interested in participating. While the urban community of Zacualpa as well as three adjacent villages were surveyed, this article draws on the survey data from one of these three villages, Tablón, the home of the 10 interviewees who completed the in-depth interviews. The full survey data were analyzed and a Spanish-language report as well as the original data were returned to the communities for their ongoing community development work (see Lykes, Sibley, Thomas,

Álvarez López & Chich González, 2016).

The survey instrument was developed collaboratively between co-researchers at Boston College and in Zacualpa. The questions were based on preliminary analysis of interview data, participant observation, and local concerns. Additional youth over 18 years old from Zacualpa were trained in research ethics, survey administration, and data collection and joined the research team. These co-researchers first mapped Tablón to determine the number and locations of houses that needed to be surveyed (see Figure 1 below). Once houses and other structures within the community (e.g., small stores, churches, wells, a school) were identified, a Guatemala-based research assistant visited each home with residents and obtained verbal consent. Heads of households in 137 of the 144 occupied homes (95%) agreed to participate in the community survey. A local co-researcher read survey items aloud to the head of household in their preferred language (K'iche' or Spanish) and the responses were recorded by hand.

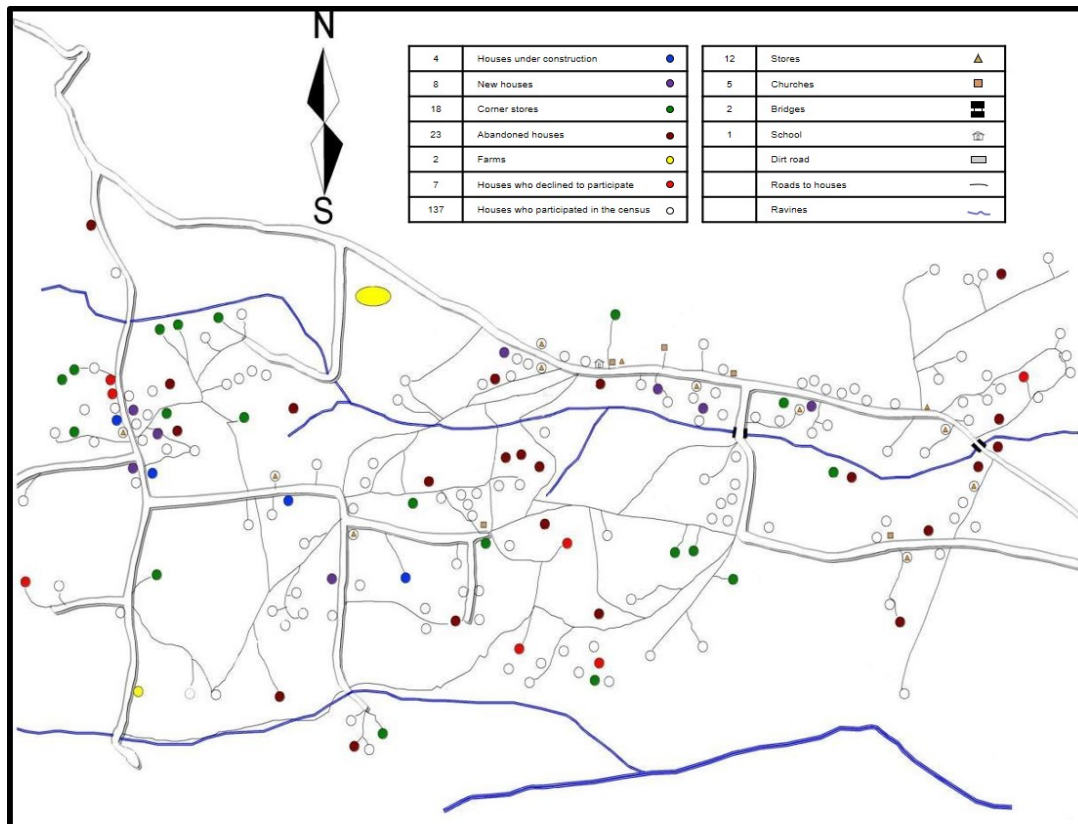


Figure 1. Community Map of El Tablón

The survey included multiple components: demographic information, migrant family member information, information about the material conditions of the home, and information about debt. Demographic information included the name and education levels of the head of household, the ethnic group of the family and the language used at home, and the name, age, education level, and current location of each member of the family. An additional section was filled out about each member of the family who had migrated to the United States, including when and where

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they went, the amount of debt they had incurred for the journey, whether they were detained, deported, or returned to Guatemala by their own volition, as well as their legal situation in the U.S. The final section of the survey sought to document material benefits that respondents perceived to be the result of migration and included housing quality (i.e., building materials, plumbing, cooking methods (gas, electricity, firewood, etc.)) and other material goods (e.g., radio, television, cell phone, computer, or vehicle). Data collection was carried out by local co-researchers from the MHRP during 2011. Responses were entered into an Excel sheet by the research team in Guatemala, and were later transferred to SPSS statistical software by the U.S.-based members of the research team.

#### **4. Analysis**

The qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed individually and then integrated and interpreted interactionally, that is, through repeated references from one to the other to better understand migrant families' lived experiences. In 2010, a preliminary and cursory thematic analysis of Phase 1 data was conducted by the first author and these ideas were discussed with local Mayan and Ladinx co-researchers who were planning local actions in the community to support migrant families. The preliminary findings as well as co-researchers' reflections on local activities (e.g., workshops on the right to migrate; informational booths and migration-related floats in annual town fiestas; etc.) informed the development of the survey. Phase 2 data were collected and then sent to the U.S.-based research team to be transposed from local coding sheets to SPSS files. They were then analyzed and include descriptive statistics of migrant and non-migrant households, as well as analyses of differences between household types. T-test, chi-squares, and ANOVAS were computed to examine differences across groups.

Upon the analysis of the survey data, U.S. based research team, including two co-authors of this paper and Kelsey Rennebohm, returned to the Phase 1 interview data and conducted a more robust analysis of the ten interviews using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software and a constructivist grounded theory approach. Constructivist grounded theory was chosen because it facilitates an inductive approach that, through iterative phases of analysis, stays close to the data (Charmaz, 2014). All ten interviews were analyzed inductively through generating first level codes that were then grouped into axial codes. Axial codes were revised to better understand the between-codes relationships, and an explanatory model was drafted. This model was revised to enhance its explanatory capacity vis-à-vis the narratives from all interviews. It provides one possible way in which these migrant families make meaning of processes of continuous migration within and beyond their country's borders. Thus, although it represents particular experiences of a small number of Maya from one village, it is abstract enough to inform the analysis of migration processes to the U.S. in other contexts. Finally, in addition to the inductive grounded theory coding, word frequencies were analyzed to explore participants' discourse.

Following the constructivist coding of Phase 1 data, those findings were integrated with quantitative findings from Phase 2, towards developing a more in-depth description and analysis. The sequential integration of exploratory qualitative and quantitative data offers a more comprehensive account of the experiences of families who have had at least one family member migrate, and more specifically, the impact of debt on local families. The findings presented herein represent the final, integrated analysis of both Phase 1 and Phase 2 data. When possible,

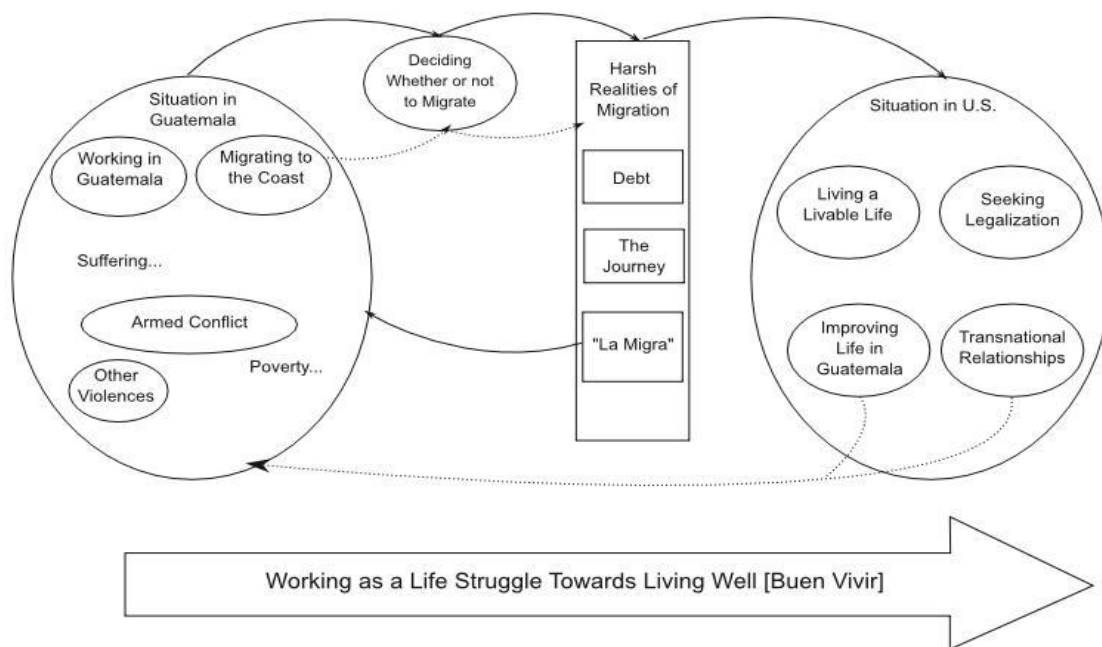


data from one phase has been used to complement and provide elaboration of findings from the other.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. *Antecedents to migrating North*

The results from the census data informed the iterative constructivist grounded theory analysis of the interviews with ten heads of households in Tablón, each of whom had at least one family member who had migrated to the U.S. and findings from Phases 1 and 2 were integrated to develop the conceptual model below. This co-construction draws on the multiple aspects of interviewees' lived experiences and the meanings they made of previous and current migrations as well as the multiple contexts migrants and their family members traverse in Guatemala and the U.S. (see Figure 2 below).



**Figure 2. Transbordering towards Buen Vivir**

The model's two major elements (left and right spheres in Figure 2) represent the interviewees' experiences of having a transborder family, that is, living within Guatemala and the U.S. They have configured family within or despite multiple historic events and lived experiences, including migratory movements as well as the imagined, anticipated, and then experienced economic and socioemotional consequences of the journey. Many narratives focused on the unavoidable barriers that mediate the migratory process and these are positioned between the two geographies. Despite the latter, families sought work that would enable them to

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sustain their intergenerational families whose well-being or *buen vivir* [living well] was a persistent goal. We describe the model's elements (*italicized* and in *bold* as they are mentioned in the text) and the relationships among them in more detail below and include findings from the quantitative survey, providing a holistic mosaic.

Interviewees' understandings of their *Situation in Guatemala* were embedded in remembrances of historical events and of stories of current socioeconomic and political challenges. All interviewees narrated experiences from the *armed conflict* and some of the older interviewees situated that conflict within memories of 500 years of Indigenous oppression. Families described violent incursions in their villages, most by soldiers or by civilian patrols (PACs), the latter of whom often included family members or neighbors who had been forced to participate. They noted that the soldiers and PACs murdered, disappeared, imprisoned, and tortured many in the community, reports that are confirmed through findings from the CEH (1999). Despite multiple gross violations of human rights committed by the PACs some viewed them as victims of violence, given their forcible recruitment.

Villagers recalled several forms of resistance in talking about the armed conflict. They mentioned how some actively spoke up against the war and the violence. Other resisted through seeking protection, fleeing the town or hiding in their homes or in the nearby mountains. Acts of solidarity included those of community members who went back to the village to look for the dead and others who sought to protect children from the soldiers. One interviewee noted "They say that when they killed that man, people from the village said 'well, if we die, we die. So, who wants to go [to check on the man]' and my mom said 'I'll go.'" Their stories reflect personal strength and protagonism despite horrific violence. Others noted that villagers experienced fear, anger, and profound sadness, feelings that persisted despite the peace accords having been signed nearly two decades earlier. The latter included the majority of interviewees, many of whose forced migration was within Guatemala (into the mountains in the Communities of Population in Resistance (CPRs), into the city, or to adjacent towns) as well as three whose families had migrated beyond national borders. Regardless of individual differences in reports of forced migration during the genocidal violence in Tablón, the racialized violence of the armed conflict was an ever-present historical context that framed meanings these Maya made of migration.

## 5.2. *Families experiencing migration*

Although interviews drew from only ten families each of whom had at least one migrant member living in the U.S., a total of 137 families completed the survey. Of the 915 villagers, 118 (12.9%) had immigrated at some point, and 105 were still in the United States. Despite this reflecting only one-eighth of the population, migration affected 59 (43.1%) families, meaning that at least one family member from each of these families had migrated to the U.S. at some point. The majority of migrants (81.4%) were male. Household size in families that had experienced migration tended to be significantly larger ( $p < .001$ ). Specifically, families that had not experienced migration had an average household size of 5.72, while families that had experienced migration had an average household size of 7.95. Although causality cannot be inferred, it is possible that larger families require more financial capital to survive, and migration is seen as the best—or only—way to achieve economic improvement. One interviewee from Phase 1 mentioned "He [my son] said he had to leave because he didn't have a dad anymore, and he had many sisters so (...) who is going to support us." The majority of households (65.7%) were two-generational,

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with parents and children living in the home. However, 25.5% of households included three-generations with parents living with their adult children and grandchildren. Only 8.8% of households were comprised of only one generation. Three-generation families were significantly more likely than one- or two-generation families to have a member who migrated to the U.S. ( $p < .001$ ).

### 5.3. *Family constellations*

*What we know about these adult migrants.* Of all of the adults from this community (classified as those who are 18 and older), 112 (24.3%) were migrants. Of the 453 children, only 6 (1.3%) were migrants. The average age of migrants at the time of the survey was 27 years old. The most common destinations in the U.S. for migrants from this community were Rhode Island (23.7%) and Massachusetts (20.3%). Results indicated that migrants had significantly higher levels of education than non-migrants ( $p < .001$ ). In fact, only 26.7% of adult migrants had no formal education, whereas more than half of all non-migrant adults (54.7%) had no formal education. This finding adds evidence to other research indicating that in some countries, migrants tend to have higher levels of education than the general population (Keeley, 2009; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Seven of the 112 migrants had been deported; only one was female. Of the seven that had been deported, three were back in Guatemala at the time of the survey while the other four had returned to the U.S.

The qualitative data helps visualize migrants' repeated attempts to enter the U.S, despite having been detained and deported previously. One interviewee explained his son's migration experience: "the first time [he was in detention] for like a month. The second, for like a month; and the third, for a month as well. [Interviewer: So four times he was sent back to Guatemala?] Three times, the fourth time he left and he made it." Also, twenty-three additional respondents to the survey reported that one or more family members were considering migrating to the U.S. within the next year.

*How do heads of households describe why Maya migrate?* Although some were reported to have headed north during the armed conflict, others fled *other* [more recent] *violence*. One mother spoke of her daughter's experience of domestic violence at the hands of her ex-partner who was a gang member. Another woman reported that she had been repeatedly abandoned by her partners, left on her own to raise their children, many of whom then headed north. Other narratives reported violations rooted in what was described as an "unjust system." Some spoke about government authorities who neither respected nor listened to the Maya. Others situated themselves vis-à-vis neighbors, described as having more power and education, who took advantage of them through scams. One interviewee explained the latter noting that "There was a person who told others that if they wrote down their name he would give them half a million quetzales [\$62,266.50 USD]. So, a lot of people got tricked like that." In general, all interviewees noted the entrenched and continuous *poverty* in which they were forced to live despite their hard work, noting that, in many cases, these conditions led to sickness and the premature death of multiple children. Others spoke of the physical illnesses that they continue to endure, mostly provoked by the harsh and inhumane conditions in which they work. Narratives of several interviewees were thick with images of physical pain and impoverished conditions, including repeated references to *suffering*. One woman, speaking about her grandson, said that "He got sick, and he was just vomiting and telling me how [physically] bad he felt. I cry, I cry

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[crying] because I suffer too.”

All interviewees noted multiple challenges attendant to *working in Guatemala*. Some emphasized “pitiful wages” or limited job opportunities due to owners’ “lack of [good]will”, while others noted difficult environmental conditions and crop failures. Despite ongoing impoverishment and suffering, people described deploying diverse strategies to make ends meet. Some women sold weavings while others grew food or raised animals on land they owned, thereby able to feed family members or invest in their futures.

*Migrating to the coast* to work on fincas was described as among the few work options for many in Tablón. Seasonal work in coffee or sugar cane, often in extreme conditions, was common although some described returning from coastal plantations with multiple illnesses and limited, if any, cash and being unable to denounce the abuses they had experienced. Despite these limitations, many noted intergenerational familial migrations within national borders that persisted in the present.

These and other precarious conditions, the need for cash in order to provide for their families, and the nation-state’s unresponsiveness or outright ignoring of them as Maya, informed discussions focused on *deciding whether or not to migrate* to seek work opportunities beyond national borders. In these narratives migration to the coast was “more familiar” and felt “more secure”, that is, it did not entail the same risks attendant to travel to the U.S. Moreover, not only was migration to the U.S. not seasonal; many noted that it required remaining for long periods. Regardless, many people decided to journey north, motivated by the knowledge that work “in the north” provided an income that allowed them to support family in both nations and to secure better opportunities. Migrations were often described as “family decisions”, with some noting that sons or daughters often sought parental permission before undertaking the journey.

While migration was a necessity for many, others described migration to the U.S. as a “dream.” These participants spoke about opportunities in the U.S. while others mentioned hopes to secure authorized migratory status. Despite this desire, most people were deeply rooted in life in Guatemala—and a planned return—once they had accomplished something in the U.S. Participants explained migration as temporary, in order to send funds home, to buy some land, and build their houses. In this regard, one participant mentioned that her two grown children “...have plans of coming back in a long time (...) they have thought about buying land and building a house. But that takes time and a lot of money. That’s why they want to do something before they come back.”

*How do heads of households describe migrants’ journeys?* For most migrants *la migra*<sup>2</sup> was one of the greatest challenges encountered en route north. Family members of U.S.-based migrants knew U.S. laws prohibiting unauthorized entrance into the country, noting their anxiety that *la migra* would not let their migrating family member pass. Some interviewees described migrants’ encounters with CBP at the border that included arrest and return to Mexico or Guatemala. The majority reported that family members avoided *la migra* or eventually but “barely, made it to the U.S.” or arrived in “bad conditions.” They noted how relieved they were when they heard that the migrant(s) had been able to cross and were alive. Some noted the “great determination” of family members who attempted the crossing multiple times, despite threatening conditions.

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<sup>2</sup> Spanish-language colloquialism used by Guatemalan migrants, among others, to describe immigration authorities in the U.S. (including, for example, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)).

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Migrants' challenges vis-à-vis immigration authorities did not end when crossing the border. Many spoke of how those in the U.S. lived and worked with fear of being caught by la migra who was described as "going after unauthorized migrants" at work, detaining, then deporting them back to Guatemala. Many noted that their migrant family in the U.S. stayed at home as much as possible when not working to avoid immigration authorities. One interviewee who was a deportee explained "When I was there, I didn't go out that much. I went out with my friends (...) but I didn't go out alone anymore."

Two male interviewees reported their experiences of being detained and "deported home." Both had been caught by immigration authorities—one after having lived and worked in the U.S. for multiple years, and the other at the border. They described in detail "being treated as criminals" and noted how "humiliating" it had been to be detained and deported. They described being chained, locked up, and constantly controlled, while in detention. They also noted their confusion due to a lack of understandable communication from authorities. Family members described extended periods of time during which they had no information about the detained migrant, noting ongoing worry until news arrived about their whereabouts. The migrants "returned home" reported "sadness and frustration" at being "sent back" before having been able to accomplish their goals. One mentioned "... leav[ing] our homes out of need. But the bad thing is that la migra catches us. So much suffering and struggling from here to Mexico's border, there they caught me...I felt so much anger." The other underscored having been returned empty handed as he was forced to leave everything he had earned in the U.S.

*The migratory "dream" versus debt.* Debt was one among multiple preoccupations during *the journey*. The survey provided us with a unique opportunity to further assess the impact of migratory debt on sending families' well-being. Migrants from Tablón typically paid someone a significant sum of money to help them travel safely through Mexico and then across the border into the United States. These *coyotes* [guides/smugglers] are expected to "leave no trace behind" (Gathmann, 2004, p. 3). Out of the 59 families that had experienced migration, 19 (32.2%) reported still having debt, the largest amount being 243,000 quetzales (\$31,101.57 USD). This particular family had four members who had migrated, with two still living in the U.S. They noted the overwhelming challenge of paying this debt plus usurious interest when migrants in the U.S. are typically working low-paying jobs and also pay rent and other living expenses there while sending remittances to families in Guatemala. On an individual level, survey respondents reported that 27 out of 118 migrants (23%) had migratory debt. The average debt among all migrants was approximately 10,000 quetzales, (\$1,279.90 USD). However, of the 27 migrants with debt, the average debt was 56,555 quetzals (\$7,238.47 USD). Migratory debt has only recently begun to be discussed in the scholarly literature (see, e.g., Johnson & Woodhouse, 2018), even though popular media has begun to note it as a push factor (see Blitzer, 2019) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2003) estimates that about half of all migrants in developed economies are unauthorized and in debt themselves to migrate.

These sources confirm our quantitative and qualitative findings while the qualitative interviews thicken our understanding the meanings made of *debt* in Maya K'iche' families with migrants in Tablón. They described debt accrued from loans taken out to pay one or more coyotes for accompanying the long journey north. Participants explained how lacking funds for the journey, many villagers borrowed funds from friends or family in Guatemala or the U.S. However, many borrowed money from a third party who transferred unpaid debt to a local bank, that later repossessed land or homes that had been put up as collateral, internally displacing families. Others reported having sold their land to pay for the journey.

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Family members noted the significant interest rates (typically 10-15%) that were often compounded monthly, making debt nearly impossible for some to pay. Those remaining in Tablón migrated to other Guatemalan cities or to the coast in search of work that paid cash. Those who were in the U.S. were forced to allocate a significant part of their earnings to paying off debt; many there were haunted by the idea of being caught and sent back before having the chance of paying it off completely. One interviewee noted that his U.S.-based family member “still has debt, so she is always feeling sad, because what if something happens [to her] in the U.S.” These preoccupations reflect experiences of the ever-presence of la migrante. Debt was one of migrant families’ greatest preoccupations around which transnational relationships revolved.

#### 5.4. *Mayan families imagine life in the U.S.*

Despite narratives of harsh journeys and the threats due to la migrante, interviewees described many U.S.-based family members who had settled in the U.S and were *living a livable life*. Opinions about the *situation in the U.S.* reflected diverse experiences with some interviewees noting that migrant family members had been able to accomplish their goals, while others reported threats against migrants, discrimination, limited work options or job instability. This scenario was even more challenging for those who were illiterate, most of whom were women. However, in most cases migrants shared positive experiences about their U.S.-based lives, including marriages and U.S.-born children, friendships, and new networks. One young woman, who migrated while still an adolescent, finished high school and aspired to pursue higher education. Despite challenges, most migrants of the families interviewed in Tablón had decided to stay in the U.S. primarily because they were able to earn more money there than in Guatemala.

Mayan migrants were very aware of how their lives in the U.S would always pose great limitations despite *seeking* [and acquiring] *legalization*. Some family members noted that the U.S.-based migrant had paid for someone else’s identification to secure a job. One deportee narrated his efforts to legalize his status in the U.S and the immigration authorities’ denial of his application. Another family narrated how their adolescent migrant daughter had been granted legal protected status. Unfortunately, most of interviewees’ migrant family members were among the estimated more than 11 million unauthorized migrants in the U.S. Some among them had had U.S.-born children who, as citizens, contributed to their becoming part of the growing numbers of mixed-status transnational families in the U.S.

*Benefits to families in Guatemala with migrant members in U.S.* Mayan migrants in the U.S contributed to *improving life in Guatemala* for their family members. Most of the interviewees explained that U.S.-based family members sent money to Guatemala. Although “not much”, they were able to cover basic expenses; some interviewees noted that without these funds they would be unable to make ends meet. One interviewee mentioned that “because of them we are doing well here, not that well, but at least we are alive. If it wasn’t for them we wouldn’t be able to do anything here other than kill ourselves working.” Some used this money to support the education of young family members, while others used it to build or complete the construction of a home.

*Housing quality.* Respondents reported information on the quality of their homes, including materials used to build the roof, walls, and floor, type of water, plumbing, and how they cooked (gas, wood, etc.). Results indicated that families that had experienced migration had significantly better home quality than those who had not ( $p < .01$ ), and this difference was still significant after controlling for debt ( $p < .01$ ). A separate analysis also indicated that families that had

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experienced migration had larger homes as measured by the number of rooms ( $p < .01$ ). Specifically, families that had experienced migration had an average of 2.64 rooms in their home, while those who had not had a migrant had an average of 1.94 rooms (the survey specified that respondents should report the number of rooms excluding the bathroom and kitchen). This variable was a proxy for size of house since information on square footage was not available.

We expected that families that had experienced migration but still had not paid off their house (of which there were 9) might have high levels of migratory debt. We found that this is the case: the families that had experienced migration and paid off their house had a mean family migratory debt of 14,294.12 quetzales (\$1,822.07 USD), while those families that had experienced migration but had not paid off their house had a mean family migratory debt that was over three and a half times larger at 50,875 quetzales (\$6,485.04 USD).

*Household goods.* Families also reported whether or not they had any of 8 material possessions (radio, stereo, television, cell phone, refrigerator, motorcycle, vehicle, and computer). Analyses indicated that families that had experienced migration had significantly more material possessions than those who had not ( $p < .001$ ); specifically, those who experienced migration had an average of 3.02 possessions, and those who had not had an average of 1.88 possessions. This finding held even after controlling for debt ( $p < .01$ ). Although one cannot infer causality, this may be due to the fact that families with migrants often receive remittances, which may allow them to purchase more possessions. A particularly relevant finding was that 93.2% of families that had experienced migration had a cell phone, while only 51.2% of families that had not experienced migration had one. The former described communicating with their family member(s) in the U.S., perhaps explaining purchase of a phone. One-generation families were significantly more likely to have fewer material possessions than two- or three-generation families ( $p < .01$ ), but two and three generation families did not significantly differ in the amount of material possessions ( $p = .507$ ).

### 5.5. *Children living in households with migrants*

Although very few of the 454 children in the village (classified as those who are under 18) had migrated to the U.S. by 2011 (only 6, or 1.3%), almost half of the children were experiencing migration in a proximal way. In fact, 211 children (46.5%) lived in families in which at least one household member has migrated and most were in the U.S. at the time of the survey. Out of 122 families with children, 56 of these families (45.9%) experienced the migration of a household member. Although much previous research has reported remittances as supporting the education of children “left behind”, we found no significant differences among children living in families with or without migrants.

*Psychosocial costs.* Although migrants were able to send back some money to Guatemala and contribute to their family members’ well-being, this did not ease the daily pain of *transnational relationships*, punctuated by distance between family members “here and there.” Most of these interviewees expressed sadness due to prolonged separations, feelings exacerbated by the fact that migrants’ return to Guatemala to visit was almost impossible given the risks previously described. Interviewees reported not having seen their migrant family members in multiple years, and sometimes several weeks went by without communication between them. One interviewee noted that “we feel a bit sad because she left. We don’t know how she is doing, if she is alive or not. Because she is away we don’t see each other anymore. We are left with sadness.” Families





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Despite complex and seemingly contradictory particularities within each family, work and family were salient themes in all interviews, and *working as* [part of interviewee's] *life struggle towards living well [buen vivir]*. Interviewees emphasized work as constitutive of who they were from childhood, noting that they had instilled this “habit of being” in their children and grandchildren. Participants underscored working hard and struggling as necessities and as reflective of their investment in providing more opportunities for future generations (e.g., their support of children’s and grandchildren’s education). Some interviewees noted that they had begun to reap the benefits of their work in Guatemala. Others explained that it was the efforts of U.S.-based family members that enabled them to have “a better life” in Guatemala. Hopes for the future included wanting to work for themselves (rather than for others) and to learn new skills. Central to most narratives was an expressed desire to live with dignity and respect, to progress towards clearly imagined goals. One man noted that “we may not have studied the letters, but we have a mind to think about how we want to live.” Mayan hopes, aspirations, and acts of resistance or protagonism are grounded in more than 500 years of love for family and community as well as hard work. Civil disobedience including the scaling of walls, traversal of borders, defiance of repressive immigration policies and practices, and transnationalizing of family in the midst of persistent violence and impoverishment are embodied performances of desires for *buen vivir*, for living “how we want to live.”

## 6. Discussion

This exploratory mixed-methods sequential design contributes to a more holistic look at the experiences of one sending community deeply affected by intergenerational migration and punctuated by increased deportations “back home.” First, the findings provide an integrated overview of the characteristics of Mayan sending families through in-depth interviews with those “left behind” conducted in 2010 and a 2011 survey. Second, the findings identify some of the positive as well as some of the negative consequences of migration for those “left behind.”

The current study reveals that within the town of Tablón almost half of all families with children have had at least one family member migrate to the U.S. Those families that experienced migration were likely to be three generational and significantly larger than those without migrants in the north. Migrants were more likely to be formally educated than non-migrants. Heads of households described those migrations as family decisions taken in light of a range of structural push factors including a context of historical and ongoing political violence, impoverishment, and social suffering. Migration for many was the only option outside of “working until death” whereas some saw it as a “dream” for a better life. Approximately one third of the families that experienced migration reported unpaid debt.

Families reported a complex mix of socioemotional and material consequences of migration. Positive benefits included increased size and quality of homes as well as a greater number of material possessions than families who had no migrant member. Notwithstanding this, some interviewees described enhanced stress for both family members in Guatemala and those who had migrated to the U.S. due the daily pain of prolonged separation from family members in the north and the challenge of repaying debt.

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## 6.1. *Select implications for nation-states*

The findings from this mixed-methods exploratory study carry multiple implications. First, the census project confirmed the significant number of children who are touched by the migration of a family member—a stunning 45.5% in one village who lived in a family where someone had migrated. As noted above, these effects are both positive (perhaps due to the benefits of remittances) and negative (perhaps due to the loss of an important caregiver and adult figure in the child’s life). They suggest a need for teachers and administrators in the local schools to be more aware of the potential for negative academic and socio-emotional consequences that have been found to affect some children who are “left behind” by migration (Cortes, 2007; Moran-Taylor, 2008). Relatedly, Hershberg & Lykes (2015) and Sánchez Ares & Lykes (2016) found that children in Zacualpa and its villages living in families with parental migrants who have been absent over many years long for reunification with their parents and, despite considerable knowledge about the risks of journeying north alone as well as a hostile U.S. reception that includes discrimination and racism (see, e.g., Lykes & Sibley, 2013), continue to leave Zacualpa for the U.S. Many see migration as the only route to realize a “life project”, challenging Guatemalan decision-makers to improve educational and work options while redressing discriminatory practices that limit access of rural Maya to these resources.

Second, the finding that adult migrants are significantly more likely to be more formally educated than non-migrants suggest additional implications for the community. Although more cross-community data is needed to determine whether this is a consistent pattern across various migratory populations, the exodus of a country’s more educated citizens, that is, those with more social capital, has potentially negative economic impacts. The creation of jobs with living wages as part of more integrated local projects could foster in-country social and economic capital towards a demand for the “right to remain”, a complement to the dominant assertion of one’s “right to migrate.”

Third, presentations of research findings to the local Tablón community as well as within the town of Zacualpa generated lively discussions that motivated those who had not been interviewed to share more stories, extending the PAR process to new participants. MHRP local co-researchers and staff responded to these single mothers’ stories through assisting them in developing local income-generating skills. Spouses of U.S.-based migrants acquired basket weaving and sewing skills, after which they developed cooperatives that facilitated the sale of their goods at local markets, generating some cash income.

## 6.2. *Limitations of the current study*

Despite the strength of these findings and their implications, there are multiple limitations. This first set of analyses focuses specifically on the community of Tablón, and therefore may not be generalizable to other regions in Guatemala. For the quantitative portion of the project, a major limitation is that there was no pre-migration information collected from families. Thus, it is possible that families who had migrants had better home quality before the migrant went to the U.S., and thus the quality of the home or increase of material resources are not caused by having a migrant member. Furthermore, no data was collected to ask recipients about the migrant’s financial contributions to the family before migration or remittances after return or deportation, to assess whether remittances are the causal link to improved housing quality, education, or

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material possessions. The qualitative interviews with older women required translation and interpretation from K'iche' to Spanish and vice versa and local residents rather than professional translators provided these resources. Ongoing training with co-researchers and interpreters helped illuminate and redress some of these challenges but the lack of formally trained K'iche'-speaking researchers was a persistent limitation. Despite these limitations this exploratory sequential mixed-methods study offers a thicker description “from the ground up”, work that documents cross-border actions and multiple meanings made of family, work, and well-being by some rural Maya K'iche' in the Southern Quiché region of Guatemala living in intergenerational transborder families.

### **6.3. *Transbordering? Challenges towards borderless futures***

Migrants' actions and family members' narratives about the meanings made through their movements north provoke those of us who accompany them and dialogically co-construct knowledge alongside them to note that they are crafting a more transnational interdependent *buen vivir*. Despite the stress of migratory debt and the harsh realities of militarized borders this exploratory study has mapped the persistent migration of Maya whose actions insist on the possibilities of an alternative and potentially new form of circular migration. Notwithstanding the negative socioemotional consequences of prolonged separation, migrating family members are reconfiguring families through transbordering, movements that reflect new systems and structures of interdependence fostered in some ways by new technologies (i.e., phones, internet, etc.). Their movements challenge nation-states in the north and south to rethink borders and the national and international laws that control human movement and reinforce longstanding and racialized barriers rather than supportive bridges for those “on the move” (Achiune, 2017; 2019). Second, the ever-present stories of historical and continuous structural and physical violence including extreme poverty in Maya's narratives of family members' reasons for migration reflect a refusal to stay put in the midst of neoliberal capitalism rooted in centuries of colonization and racism that has sought to erode Mayan ways of being and to occupy their lands. Writ large, these Maya take actions in the wake of historical and persistent genocidal violence and re-affirm their life project, their *buen vivir*. They respond through civilly disobeying border regulations that reduce them to political-economic migrants without the rights of currently recognized asylum seekers, seeking to traverse bordered nation-states in ways that affirm interdependence driven from and in benefit of those, like themselves, living on the margins. Aware of U.S. legal systems and the harsh barriers encountered en route, they civilly disobey, crossing borders and challenging former colonizers to desist from current inflammatory, ahistorical rhetoric, policies and practices that deny U.S. complicity in their historical and ongoing marginalization. Achiune (2017; 2019) challenges the legal profession to re-craft international human rights and migratory laws towards recognizing current migrations from the global south as decolonizing strategies, criticisms that echo the warnings of Indigenous scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) who argue that “decolonization is not a metaphor,” but rather entails material change including the “repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (p. 1). We draw on this exploratory study's findings to suggest that this one small group of multi-generational migrants leaving Tablón for the U.S. in the 21<sup>st</sup> century provoke us to imagine an interdependent praxis (Freire, 1970), that is, action-reflection processes whereby those “on the move” within and beyond the borders of

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nation-states engage in iterative cycles of action and reflection towards transforming repressive colonial social structures.

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